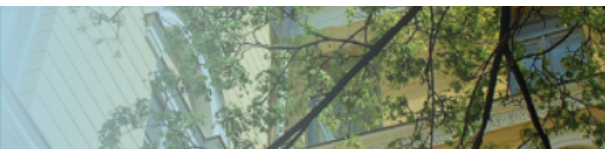


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American Presidents, Scholarship, and the Power of Literature

President John Kennedy once famously quipped to a group of Nobel laureates, that they presented “the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has ever been gathered together at the White House, with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone.”¹ Kennedy’s keen wit was part of his considerable charm. As he would probably have conceded, though, a quip is partial—in both senses.

This paper will discuss whether there is any correlation between scholarly attainments and presidential performance. Then, it will consider the influence of presidential biographies. Finally, it will examine the unique confluence of a literary and philosophical movement with an intellectually powerful president.

No one can question Jefferson’s intellect, yet he was not alone. Italian Count Carlo Vidua met both Jefferson and Madison. Although each was impressive, he concluded that while Jefferson was more brilliant, Madison was more profound.² Henry Adams argued that Albert Gallatin, Jefferson’s treasury secretary, may have been the best informed person in the country.³

Presidential scholars Landy and Milkis note that the country’s “most cerebral and theoretical” presidents include not only Jefferson, but also Lincoln, Wilson, and

Theodore Roosevelt.⁴ Adams scholar Richard Alan Reyer son said that in his chosen fields of law, political theory, and European history John Adams was “the most learned of the Founding Fathers.”⁵ Others have agreed. The physician Benjamin Rush, a Revolutionary patriot who was a friend to both Adams and Jefferson, said that Adams “possessed more learning probably, both ancient and modern, than any man who subscribed the Declaration of Independence.”⁶ That included the Declaration’s primary author, Jefferson. A generation later the Transcendentalist clergyman, Theodore Parker—himself a man of broad intellect and fluent in twenty languages—said that “no American politician of the eighteenth century” was intellectually superior to Adams except for Benjamin Franklin.”⁷

Partly because of politics—losing office after one term, submerged in history by the brilliance and style of Jefferson’s “revolution of 1800”—Adams long was among the most ignored of America’s Founders. Ironically, his son, John Quincy, an intellectual force in his own right, lost his own presidency after one term to Andrew Jackson and the wave of “Jacksonianism.” Another factor was personality. Adams (both, in fact) could be irritable, arrogant, overly sensitive to perceived slights, and neither was adept at—or concerned with—pleasing the crowd. Regardless of intellect, neither Adams is among the most successful presidents.

John Adams, though, finally captivated the public mind—at least its more literate component. David McCullough’s popular, *John Adams*, for which he won his second Pulitzer Prize, brought new attention to this largely forgotten Founder.⁸ McCullough

brought other attention to Adams, most recently (2008) in the form of a well-received television mini-series on the Home Box Office cable channel. Adams would be pleased.

Biography also contributed to the resuscitation of Harry Truman's reputation. It was very low when he left office in January 1953, but proceeded to grow steadily on its own. Like Adams, Truman had the disadvantage of succeeding a giant figure, in his case Franklin D. Roosevelt; unlike Adams, Truman had a personality that wore well, and he fared far better than any other president who followed a truly extraordinary figure (Adams, Van Buren, Andrew Johnson, and Taft). Truman could be petty—and he was hardly charismatic—but he radiated honesty, had generally good judgment, was forthright, and was decisive. More and more the public came to appreciate his plain-spoken style. When he died (December, 1972) the country was shaken by Vietnam, and may have been marginally aware that it soon would be shaken yet again by “Watergate.”

In 1973 Alonzo Hamby, published an analytical work on Truman's presidency,⁹ and soon, in 1975, a one-man show on Broadway, “Give ‘Em Hell Harry,” captivated the country. James Whitmore received an Oscar nomination for his portrayal of Truman the same year in the filmed version. Other books praising Truman followed, as did television shows. Perhaps most successful in portraying the “Man from Missouri” to a general audience was a hugely popular—and also excellent—biography by David McCullough.¹⁰ This brought McCullough his first Pulitzer Prize, and solidified Truman's reputation as an outstanding American president. Robert Ferrell then brought out an in-depth study in 1994,¹¹ and Hamby added yet another in 1995.¹²

A marginally informed observer might find it odd, knowing of him only as a caricature, but the most literary president was Theodore Roosevelt. He had written biographies, American and military history, and scientific studies on songbirds and big game animals. William Harbaugh, one of his best biographers, noted that TR's breadth "was incredible. He knew, often in the original, Villon, Ronsard, Mistral, Körner, Topelius, Goethe, Dante, Dumas, and hundreds of others. He was versed in the minor Scandinavian sagas, the Arabian tales, the core of Rumanian literature, and" Harbaugh added, "he even earned honorary presidency of the Gaelic Literature Association." He said that Roosevelt had interests more catholic "than all but a handful of his country's men of letters and probably most of its college professors." In addition, he had read "the bulk of his own country's literature and knew personally perhaps a majority of the nation's best writers." Certainly, as Harbaugh said, this was "a rare quality in any man of action," and was "a unique quality in a president." To be sure, there were other intellectual presidents—he named Jefferson, the Adamses, and Wilson—but none other had come close to generating Theodore Roosevelt's "virile intellectualism."¹³

In Roosevelt's case, this happy combination brought extraordinary results, but there seems little correlation between wide-ranging intellectual interests and successful presidencies. Each Adams had a troubled presidency, losing his bid for re-election. Both Jefferson and Wilson had splendid first terms, but second terms that were little short of disastrous.

Lincoln was certainly among America's most cerebral presidents, but had no formal education. His reading was more characterized by depth than by breadth, yet he was superbly—considering his challenges one might conclude uniquely—successful. Jackson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson obviously possessed keen intelligence also—it is not too extreme to say that along with Lincoln they exhibited political genius—but they were not scholars nor were they “intellectuals.” Unlike Lincoln, they were not among our most “cerebral” presidents, yet Jackson and FDR performed superbly in office, and LBJ was extraordinarily effective in his domestic policy.

Hoover was a superb engineer and had been an effective public servant, but failed as president. Polk read nothing but government reports (and, on Sundays, the Bible), yet was the only highly successful president—successful in terms of achieving his goals—in the quarter century between Jackson and Lincoln.

Theodore Roosevelt is the exception. His intellect and breadth matched that of every president; his presidency was extraordinary for its accomplishments and precedents. Roosevelt was a complicated figure whose unique qualities are unlikely ever to be duplicated. John Milton Cooper gives us a splendid description of the result. TR, he said, exploited the “varied dimensions of his office to a degree that has never since been fully matched. His redecoration and renaming of the White House foreshadowed an interest in government promotion of the arts that had not existed since the 1820s.” Cooper noted TR's own boast that he gave the country the “most beautiful coinage since the days of Hellenistic Greece.” His devotion to conservation, his funding of environmental projects,

and his protection of the environment in general are well known. Less well known were his successes in providing funds for cultural projects, for scientific research, and his deep concern “about the public impact of art and literature.” In short, says Cooper, TR pursued the Renaissance political ideal of “the state as a work of art.”¹⁴

Nevertheless, the reputation of his presidency was perhaps more affected by biography than that of any other. TR, the youngest president ever, the most energetic, the first to serve entirely in the twentieth century, and the first to be called affectionately by his initials characterized an age as did Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, and Lincoln before him. He left office in 1909 so popular that he could easily have been re-elected had he ignored his rash pledge not to run again—the pledge that he blurted out when he won re-election. Even though later he split the Republican Party when he failed to get the 1912 nomination and ran again as the third-party “Bull Moose Progressive” candidate, the Republicans by 1918 had forgiven him. They were coalescing once more around his candidacy, and he almost assuredly would have been the successful nominee in 1920 had he not died in January of 1919.¹⁵

Memorials sprang up throughout the country. Highways took his name, as did Theodore Roosevelt Island in the Potomac in Washington, D.C. His likeness even shares the monument on Mount Rushmore with those of Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln. All this and more came about without concerted political propaganda by a group of dedicated zealots—such as those who in the 1990s sought to put the name of another president, Ronald Reagan, on memorials everywhere (their successes have been confined largely to

the District of Columbia: naming a federal office building, and straining credulity by substituting Reagan's name for that of the "Father of the Country" on what had been Washington National Airport). The fervor of these enthusiasts can be gauged by their futile urging that Reagan's likeness be carved on Mt. Rushmore.

TR's popularity, however, was soon to fall victim to a savage biography by Henry Pringle,¹⁶ making his presidency perhaps the one affected more than any other by biography. Pringle's favorite word in describing this most complex statesman, was "adolescent." Roosevelt's energy and personality enabled him to be highly effective, but they also made it simple for Pringle to present him largely in caricature.

Pringle, during the 1920s, in the words of his friend Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., had "specialized in deflationary sketches of prominent figures." Schlesinger described Pringle's treatment of TR as "mischievous," and said that Pringle appeared to be incapable of taking him seriously. Schlesinger was sadly correct when he said of Pringle's "disenchanted portrait" that it "set the tone of commentary on TR for a generation or two."¹⁷ Its force likely was magnified because it won the Pulitzer Prize.

Nearly a quarter century had passed when John Morton Blum published *The Republican Roosevelt*, an equally influential—and vastly more balanced—study.¹⁸ Since then, numerous biographies have followed. All, in contrast to Pringle's, have sought to present the whole TR; moreover, their presentations, while balanced, have tended to be highly favorable. Theodore Roosevelt's reputation, since Blum wrote, has soared.

That one well-written but devastating biography could have so damaged the reputation of such a figure is a tribute to the power of words and of literature. That it is dangerous to underestimate literary power is illustrated further by the example of Transcendentalism.

Transcendentalism emerged quietly in 1836 when a group of writers—with fluctuating membership, but including a number of Unitarian clergy—started meeting regularly for discussions in Boston at the home of the Rev. George Ripley. “There was never more than a loose association for purposes of intellectual stimulation,” but the group’s detractors sensed conspiracy. Ironically, their opposition to what they named the “Transcendental Club” generated force for Transcendentalist ideas. Even though there never would be any organization, or even sufficient agreement to warrant the description of a “club,” the intensity of those who feared it guaranteed that Transcendentalism would become well-known.¹⁹

For a number of reasons, including widely differing views among its highly individualist adherents, Transcendentalism is not easy to define. As Unitarianism had grown from Calvinism and added rational analysis, so had Transcendentalism grown from Unitarianism, adding spiritual striving. At its heart lay the conviction that ideas were not limited to information gained through the senses; they could be innate, or could be received directly from the divine. Human beings themselves contained a reflection of the divine, and were in fact part of an overall divinity—Ralph Waldo Emerson termed it the Oversoul. They were intellectuals who recognized the intellect as incomplete; they

accepted emotion, but not at the expense of the intellect. Above all, they glorified articulate consciousness, and believed in absolutes, and in progress toward the ideal.

Transcendentalism's influence ranges far beyond literature, affecting education, philosophy, the arts, social thought, and an even wider range of intellectual activities.²⁰ In addition to Emerson, the most prominent Transcendentalists were Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Theodore Parker.

An American Studies student at the University of Hong Kong once asked whether Transcendentalism had any lasting effect. No less an authority, after all, than Emerson had said after the fact that nothing more serious came of the early meetings of the group “than the modest quarterly journal called *The Dial*, which under the editorship of Margaret Fuller, and later of some other [Emerson, himself], enjoyed its obscurity for four years.” Emerson did concede that the journal had contained some “noble papers by Margaret Fuller,” and that some issues “had an instant exhausting sale because of papers by Theodore Parker”—who, he said, had been “our Savonarola.”²¹

The student's question was reasonable. However influential Transcendentalist ideas were during America's “Romantic Period,” today one is likely to encounter Transcendentalism rarely. Yet Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) was a pioneering work in feminism that, as Perry Miller noted, “influenced the calling” of the famous Seneca Falls Conference in 1848. This was a milestone toward women's rights and women's suffrage in America. Because Transcendentalism encouraged “new critique of

the social structure,” Miller concluded that it inevitably led to new consideration of relations between the sexes.²²

Politically, the most noted influence certainly was Thoreau’s. His famous essay, “Civil Disobedience,” found resonance in such widely separated venues as Russia, Gandhi’s India, and Martin Luther King’s demonstrations in America for civil rights. Nevertheless, Emerson, Whitman, and Parker exercised lasting influence.

In 1837, Emerson gave his address “The American Scholar,” in which he ascribed the “sacredness” that attached to the act of creation. Oliver Wendell Holmes later called it an “intellectual declaration of independence.”²³ Five months later, a young Abraham Lincoln addressed the Young Men’s Lyceum in Springfield, Illinois, calling for a “political religion.” Hutchison draws a “spectrum of ‘transcendental’ politics,” upon which “The American Scholar” and the Lyceum Address are two points. Connecting the two is “a near spiritual belief in the Declaration of Independence as enshrining a *transcendental* principle removed from historical contingency: the principle that all men are created equal.”²⁴ The great abolitionist orator and former slave, Frederick Douglass, who at times expressed great impatience with Lincoln, said to the President that his Second Inaugural “was a sacred effort.”²⁵

Whitman was the least likely Transcendentalist. He was from New York not New England, was working class, had not gone to Harvard (or any other college), and was an ardent nationalist. He nevertheless was one of the most innovative poets in history, and

his poetry strongly influenced the political rhetoric of America's most poetic president, Abraham Lincoln.²⁶ Critics Jacques Barzun and Edmund Wilson each noted that Lincoln could have been a major force in letters.²⁷

Lincoln's law partner, William Herndon, called his attention to Theodore Parker's writings.²⁸ As president, Lincoln's mastery of the language enabled him to create, in the Gettysburg Address, what Garry Wills accurately described as "The Words that Remade America." Wills pays tribute to his genius: "Lincoln was an artist." His Address "created a political prose for America, to rank with the vernacular excellence of Twain."²⁹

In 272 words, Lincoln portrayed the Declaration of Independence as America's founding document, with the Constitution as an imperfect instrument designed to approximate the Declaration's ideal.³⁰ "Equality" took its place among America's fundamental principles. Lincoln's "dialectic of ideals struggling for their realization in history owes a great deal to the primary intellectual fashion of his period, Transcendentalism." The Declaration became an influence not limited to America; one that radiated "out to *all* people *everywhere*."³¹ As Hutchison put it, Lincoln had "transplanted" the "'transcendentalist' credo to the political sphere."³²

Wills quotes Hemingway that "all modern American novels are the offspring of *Huckleberry Finn*. It is no greater exaggeration." Wills adds, "to say that all modern political prose descends from the Gettysburg Address."³³ Lincoln "was a Transcendentalist without the fuzziness. He spoke a modern language because he was

dealing with a scientific age. . . . Words were weapons, for him, even though he meant them to be weapons of peace in the midst of war.” Wills does not exaggerate when he writes that Lincoln “came to change the world, to effect an intellectual revolution. No other words could have done it. The miracle is that these words did. In his brief time before the crowd at Gettysburg he wove a spell that has not, yet, been broken. . . .”³⁴

Wills wrote these words more than a decade and a half ago. Recently, that spell has become strained. America entered dark days: its government engaged in pre-emptive war, and took no notice of the pitifully few protests against it; days in which a president asserted, with little contradiction, that he could rule without limit, thus coming close to erasing Lincoln’s “self-government;” days during which America could seriously debate, apparently without shame, the extent to which official forces could impose torture. Those days have not passed, despite the discrediting of the administration that brought them, but there is promise that they are ending [please note that this essay was written in early 2008, before the nomination and election of President Obama].

Lincoln’s interpretation of the Declaration was the interpretation that most Americans had come to accept;³⁵ it may yet be restored as official policy with the replacement of those now in office. Repairing the damage will take time. Wills notes that “preparing the public mind” was of great importance in an age of Transcendentalism.³⁶ It is no less important now that Lincoln’s principles have suffered erosion from such powerful assault. Using the proper words, adopting literature to the task may be of great assistance

in the restoration. It will require wisdom, and leadership of enormous skill. The world will join us in hoping that it will not require another Abraham Lincoln.

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¹ Quoted by Michael Genovese in *The Power of the American Presidency*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 43; the occasion was a dinner on 29 April 1962 for 49 Nobel laureates.

² See Ralph Ketcham, *James Madison: A Biography*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990, pp. 620-621.

³ See Max J. Skidmore, *Presidential Performance: A Comprehensive Review*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishers, 2004, pp. 31-44.

⁴ Marc Landy and Sidney Milkis, *Presidential Greatness*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000, pp. 71 & 51.

⁵ Richard Alan Reyerson, ed., "Introduction," *John Adams and the Founding of the Republic*, Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2001, p. 1

⁶ Quoted in Ralph Adams Brown, *The Presidency of John Adams*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1975, p. 7.

⁷ Quoted *ibid.*

⁸ David McCullough, *John Adams*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001.

⁹ Alonzo Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal: Harry S. Truman and American Liberalism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1973.

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- ¹⁰ David McCullough, *Truman*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992.
- ¹¹ Robert H. Ferrell, *Harry S. Truman: A Life*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994.
- ¹² Hamby, *Man of the People*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- ¹³ William H. Harbaugh, *The Life and Times of Theodore Roosevelt*, rev. ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 434.
- ¹⁴ John Milton Cooper, Jr., *The Warrior and the Priest*, Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1983, pp. 86-87; see also Skidmore, "Ranking and Evaluating Presidents: The Case of Theodore Roosevelt," *White House Studies*, 1:4 (2001), pp. 495-504.
- ¹⁵ See Skidmore, "Ranking and Evaluating," pp. 499-500.
- ¹⁶ Henry Pringle, *Theodore Roosevelt: A Biography*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1931.
- ¹⁷ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Life in the Twentieth Century*, New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 2000, p. 264.
- ¹⁸ John Morton Blum, *The Republican Roosevelt*, New York: Harvard University Press, 1954.
- ¹⁹ See Max J. Skidmore, *Legacy to the World: A Study of America's Political Ideas*, New York: Peter Lang, 1998, p. 142.
- ²⁰ See Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History*, New York: Hill and Wang, 2007.
- ²¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England," Lecture before the Concord Lyceum, 1880, in *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology*, Perry Miller, ed., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950, p. 502.
- ²² Perry Miller, *The Transcendentalists*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950, p. 457.
- ²³ Anthony Hutchison, *Writing the Republic*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, p. 30.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- ²⁵ See Ronald C. White, Jr., *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002, p. 199.
- ²⁶ See Daniel Mark Epstein, *Lincoln and Whitman*, New York: Ballantine Books, 2004.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- ²⁸ Miller, p. 450.

²⁹ Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992, p, 52.

³⁰ For a different interpretation, see Gabor Boritt, *The Gettysburg Gospel*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006.

³¹ Wills, p. 103

³² Hutchison, p. 52

³³ Wills., p. 148.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 174-175.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 120.